Castle®

Babak Radboy (BR)

Babak Radboy is a New York-based artist and art director whose work with brands like Telfar or the Berlin Biennale masquerade as advertising, yet sharply critique the industries they exist within. In 2017, Telfar and Radboy embarked on an iconic collaboration with the fast food chain White Castle, in which the designer created new employee uniforms and held an after-party in their Times Square location. On its surface, the partnership felt riddled with irony, but in fact it crystallized the brand's vision for a total reconfiguration of high and low culture. The project demonstrates how Radboy understands his role as a Trojan Horse-like figure—or better yet, a bootlegger smuggling "illegitimate" ideas into "legitimate" frameworks in an attempt to disrupt structures of oppression. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: I see a relationship between aspects of bootlegging and your practice, and I say this thinking of a more expanded definition of the term: focusing on ideas of subversion, infiltration, and an antagonistic relationship to structures of power. I'm curious about

how you understand the idea of bootlegging, and how it might resonate with your work.

BR: I would relate it to private property. I relate it to how the logic of private property is enforced and recreated in a wide array of phenomena in which it's not proper. This whole idea, you could say, begins with land itself. And what reinforces all of this idea is the threat of violence—without that, bootlegging can't exist. The word I actually think about all the time, as opposed to "bootlegging," is "legitimacy." I think a lot about legitimacy and illegitimacy, and in my world, I try to create as many illegitimate junctures as possible.

BS: Could you talk about specific ways this illegitimacy manifests itself in your work?

BR: It goes beyond something formal, like a video or mark. It relates more to non-tangible elements: how we set up or structure a company, the flow of information. It touches every aspect of our practice. I am interested in seeking out this illegitimacy.

Generally, this starts on a very structural level, it's not just performative. With Telfar, a lot of things that appear the way they do are a result of the social relations that preceded them. When it comes to working with corporations and magazines, that all starts in conversations, in contracts, in the sharing or not sharing of information. The processes through which I work question legitimacy. When we shoot videos, I don't say "action," which questions my own legitimacy as a director. Or when working with clients who absolutely have to be on set at a shoot, I just simply don't send them the address.

But in order for all of that to work, what we make has to actually perform. By delegitimizing the process, the client loses its bearings for how to intervene. It's not always antagonistic, sometimes it's just about setting up a process so alien that the client doesn't know how to ruin it.

It feels especially relevant as it relates to communication, and today that's often referring directly to social media. Professionalism is a process, but it also exerts an influence on the product, and nobody is looking for professionalism. Nobody is on Instagram liking something because of how professional it looks. And the professionalism that people are seeking is just zapping everyone's energy. Companies don't know what to put on their Instagram, so they just tap a bunch of professionals, they create through professional processes, they hire professionals that hire other professionals, and then you have an output that feels totally unrelated to the brand. Even the art directed photoshoot... that has happened over time without people questioning it because it fits so naturally into how careers are organized. But if you just transpose that to Instagram, with a series of images, you're setting yourself up for people to become less interested. People don't want to see a professional series of images on Instagram, and yet that's what every single company does. They don't know how to procure anything other than that because they don't have any other processes.

BS: This tension between legitimacy and illegitimacy is how I associate your practice to bootlegging. I see a bootleg as a way of undermining signs and symbols of legitimacy—such as a logo—to then sell some-

thing illegitimate. Could you speak on the power of manipulating forms or structures of legitimacy by working within them?

BR: I've always been interested in what constitutes a form. They are always the result of social processes rather than formal ones. The form encodes the social process and vice versa. And now you can imply the social process through the form, it's a way of reverse engineering. I find there is something useful about advertising. We have a very limited vocabulary of forms through which we can communicate. There is a convention around how these things are to be read. I've found the art world to be the worst possible way in which to communicate anything because the context completely forecloses the possibility that it will have an effect of any kind. You can write "Kill All Children," as Bjarne Melgaard does, on a painting and it's completely fine. But if you do that on CNN it's a problem. If you are looking for trouble, the gallery is the wrong place to go. But in advertising, because of how it is encoded, its audience will automatically identify themselves as the one being addressed. If you have imagined them, given them attributes, they will subconsciously take on these attributes. If you posit there are obvious things you both agree on, then the reader will meet you halfway—which is how advertisers create manipulation and how hegemonic practices work. If they show you a white middle-class family, then that now becomes how you understand the idea of a family. It's a level of legitimacy self-organized through the flow of capital.

p. 153: Castle N°16 (2017). Photo: Jason Keeling

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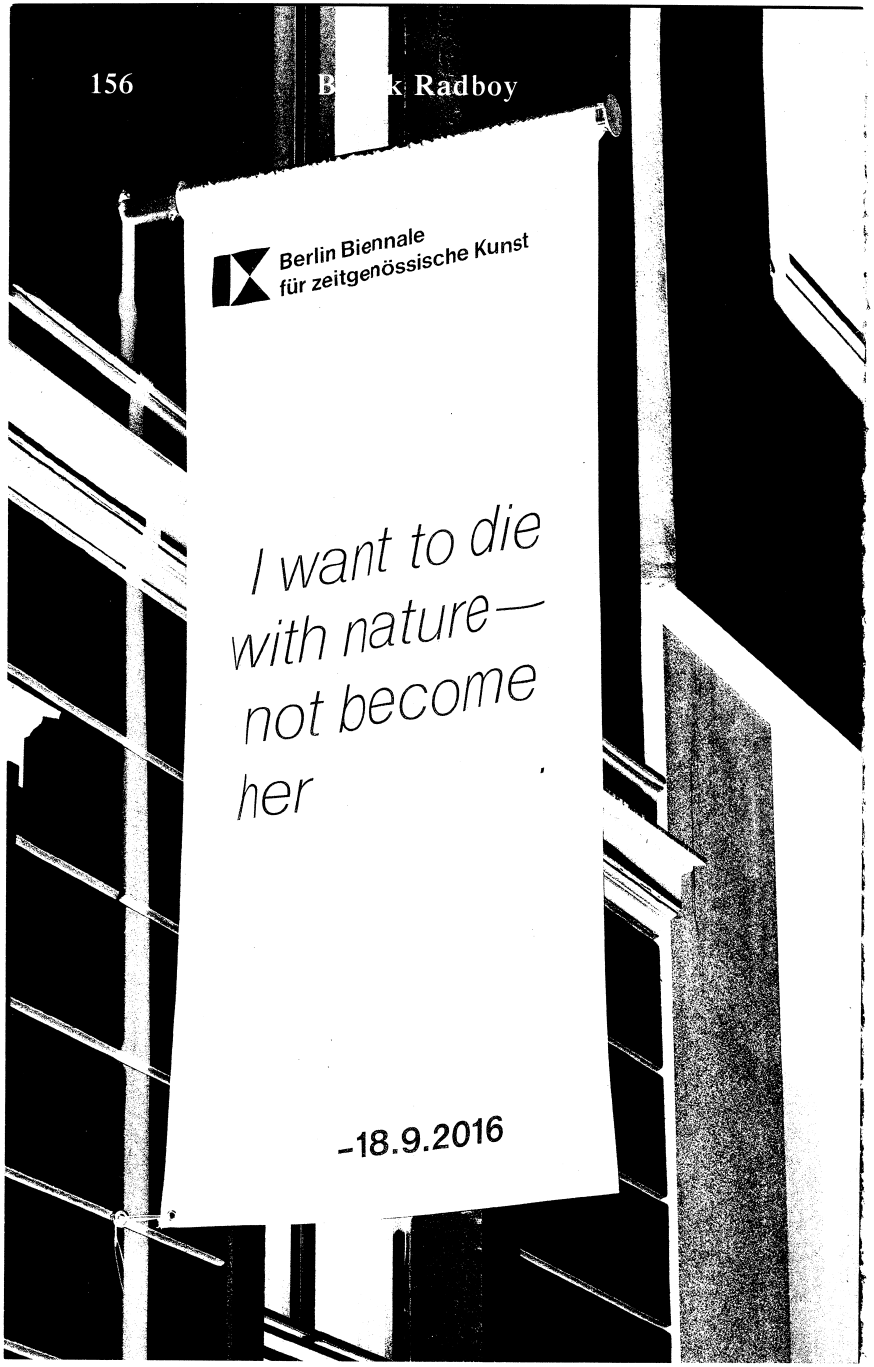
And so, with the Berlin Biennale, the ads themselves imply that it's a hegemonic attitude, so you automatically identify with it. You can say something outrageous, but you've already created this empathic process. Us saying "I want to die with nature, not become her manager," that is actually something people can identify with, but it is barred from the realm of annunciation. However, if it's presented in the right way, with the right kind of symbols of authority and the right conventions, then it becomes something much more digestible.

BS: Do you find it difficult to maintain this spirit of illegitimacy as you work with more corporate or mainstream collaborators, or as your projects find more commercial success?

BR: When it comes to Telfar in particular, it has become this really successful company, but in fact, it's actually not a company. That's not what's driving it, it's not something which is exchangeable or comparable. That has a real effect on us when it comes to things like investment. I don't think we can take on investment. Besides not wanting to, it would destroy the thing that it is; it's just not how we operate. Even if we were to make more money, the question would be, "Well, what do we want? Is there some car we want, is there some house...but under what city and what government?" The money isn't good for much. But the company gives us autonomy over time and space which allows us to spend time with people we want, to make things with the people we want to work with. The basis of the company is a social prac-

p. 154: Telfar × White Castle collection. Photo: Jason Nocito


Berlin Biennale
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tice. We used to have to organize around shows, and now we have the autonomy to organize it in whatever way we want. Of course, we have to make money to buy more time, but at least the ratio of time and money is good. We used to be making clothes and were involved in these contracts where someone is taking a huge percentage of the money, and this was something you struggled to get. And musicians and directors and producers we talked to were all involved in similar oppressive contracts. But now we're able to make videos together, we've been able to make music together, we've been able to create enough space for us where no one is really interrupting the process. And what we're making is performing, because the audience is hungry for what we are making, and the audience is outrageously underserved.

> BS: I'd like to turn to the idea of Shanzhai. I think it relates to a very contemporary form of bootlegging, or perhaps operates in this middle ground between legitimacy and illegitimacy. You've worked with this idea in the form of the Shanzhai Biennial. I'm interested in how you've seen it evolve over the past few years, from something that was disparaged to something that is now embraced as a tactic for corporations.

BR: Any thoughts around Shanzhai should be organized around the material conditions under which it was created, which have to do with a racialized global capitalism. There is no other way to look at it.

p. 157: Banner for the IXth Berlin Biennale featuring text by Chris Krauss, creative direction Babak Radboy (2016)

China's entry into the world market was supposed to be eternally subjugated. Shanzhai is one instance, on a visual level, with some fun graphic consequences, where you can see that happening. It's the same thing that happens in a city where you have poor kids inventing a new cultural form, which then becomes consumed by a global creative complex. What happened in Shanzhai is there was an opportunity that was spotted within the code where the people who were empowered to produce luxury items couldn't do so in certain ways. So Dior, for example, could never act as a mass brand because it would go against its own logic. Could Dior sell a bag for $6,000 at one store and then sell a similar bag for $200 at a different store? I don't know. But Telfar says yes, you can do that. However, the psychology of Dior, the ability for it to reproduce its message, relies on so much violence, that it couldn't produce that dichotomy and complexity. Not to mention the larger regional, cultural monopoly it exists within. So these independent producers saw an opportunity in Dior that Dior could never exploit on a mass scale. It is appropriation. But not in the strict sense where one party is innocent and one is evil. All parties involved are appropriating to just exist in the same shitty world.

> BS: Is appropriation or bootlegging still a powerful tool today, in a culture where copying is very much at the core of everything we produce?

BR: The discourse for appropriation is in a way unuseful. We act like the solution is for people to stop appropriating, when really the solution is just to destroy the world. Whenever you are acting as the relay

between two parties, you have to recognize you are betraying someone, and you need to make that choice before you start. Bootlegging is still a form of appropriation...it all is.

I think bootlegging needs to be expanded past its material manifestations and into the more conceptual forms that it's animating. That's where I see it becoming more about legitimacy. Nobody wants to say they're illegitimate, but in fact, that *is* what we should be doing—figuring out how something can be made less legitimate. Legitimacy is always about delegitimizing something else.

BS: Do you see illegitimacy as being connected to authenticity?

BR: Authenticity is an effect of illegitimacy. Legitimacy is related to violence. When you are bootlegging, when you are copying, when you are working illegitimately, you are refusing to rely on the violence that organizes the social space of annunciations.

Title page (p. 148): White Castle logo taken from the Telfar × White Castle collaboration, art directed by Babak Radboy